

Making Waves Episode 46: Noodling's not all nonsense

[intro clip]

Hi everyone, my name is Susan Washko, and welcome to Making Waves, brought to you by the Society for Freshwater Science.

Summer is upon us in North America, and I know a lot of aquatic enthusiasts out there are gearing up for all the cookouts this season will bring. In some regions of the U.S., a fish fry is a summer staple. A subset of those fish fry folks obtain their fish by noodling. For those of you who don't know, noodling is a method of catching large fish where a person gets in a river, finds an underwater hole in the bank or on the bottom of the river, sticks their arm inside the hole, and attempts to pull out whatever large fish has bitten their arm, usually a catfish, by the fish's mouth. The first time people hear about this fishing practice, they usually laugh or don't believe that it actually happens. The common view of noodling is that it's a way for rednecks to haze each other, that it's just for laughs and if you're lucky you take home a big fish. However, a tremendous amount of biological knowledge and river expertise goes into noodling, and fisheries biologists can use information gathered by noodlers while fishing. To learn more about this, I contacted expert Skipper Bivins of Big Fish Adventures, a noodling guide service in Oklahoma—you can find his website information in the info box below. I also talked to Kris Bodine, a fisheries biologist with Texas Parks & Wildlife, to tell me more.

1. Skipper, I'm sure noodling takes a lot more skill than people realize— you have to know where the fish are at what time of year, how to find them, and how to catch them. How long did it take you to learn, and how did you learn?

Skipper: It's taken a lot of time to perfect some of my noodling moves, especially open water and brush fishing, where the fish are not confined by a hole or a rock, many of which I never speak of directly, enabling the catfish to keep his advantage over most noodlers. My dad had been taught by his dad, taught me to noodle—it seems I'd been born in the water. Caught my first fish in a brush pile when I was four years old. I've been a fish junkie ever since.

2. What do you need to know about fish biology, fish behavior, and the science of rivers to be successful?

Skipper: When it comes to the biology of fish and the science of rivers, well, I slept through one of those classes and skipped the other. Seriously though, it helps to know what instinct drives the fish to spawn. The water temperature dictates that. Also, you have to be aware of what other species share the water as their home, whether they are friends or foe, such as snakes or turtles, beavers, otter or leaches, etc., etc., the list goes on and on. The big blues [blue catfish] get first pick. They are the most fun to catch, comparable to the likes of a shark attack. The male fish actually cleans out holes in the banks so that the females can go lay their eggs. The male fish seek out these nests, drive the female in to lay her eggs, then he fertilizes them, and then the male fish are the babysitters or the guards of the hole. They protect the eggs from attackers, so

anytime that anything goes in front of the hole, they attack. Whoom [clap noise]! That's how we catch fish noodling.

3. Kris, noodling is a real fishing technique, and even requires a fishing license in some states. How do fish biologists use noodling to collect data on fish?

Kris: We don't actually go noodling to collect data, we leave that part to the dedicated catfish anglers! But we do use other methods to monitor how this fishing technique impacts catfish populations across our state. Recently we conducted a large experiment on Lake Palestine, Texas where we tagged hundreds of catfish with reward tags so we could estimate how many catfish were being harvested by hand fishers, as well as all the other catfish anglers. Overall, we found that catfish harvest was fairly low, regardless which fishing method people used. Noodling is an extremely effective fishing method and it does tend to allow anglers to catch and harvest bigger and more fish than they typically could with other fishing methods. But, based on the data we collected thus far, noodling does not appear to be problematic. First, its self-limiting...there aren't just very many people who are willing to blindly stick their arm into an underwater hole. Second, noodling is really only effective during the spawning period, which only lasts a few months. So there is a fairly short window when noodlers can actually catch these big catfish.

4. Fisheries managers and people that fish often have the same goals, right? They want healthy fish in healthy rivers. How do those two groups work together? How do folks that noodle participate in informing science or improving knowledge of fish populations?

Kris: Strong partnerships between anglers and a fisheries manager is extremely important. Our job is to produce the best possible fishing experience for our anglers and in order to do that, we must understand the needs, opinions, and preferences of our anglers. We routinely conduct angler surveys so that we can better understand what it is that the anglers want. As part of our Lake Palestine study I previously mentioned, we attempted to survey as many noodlers as we possibly could so that we could get feedback on how to better manage our catfish populations. That feedback, along with feedback from other catfish anglers is currently helping us develop a management plan for Texas' catfish populations.

5. Skipper, I think most people would be scared to try noodling. What's your favorite part?

Skipper: Many people are squeamish to overcome their fear of noodling. In order to experience the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, from the bite of a big ol' blue cat, a person must overcome their fear of the water. As it is a water sport, being able to swim definitely helps. Noodlers are world-class athletes, overcoming the elements, water, fish bites, beavers, snakes, turtles, and rough terrain. It helps if you can hold your breath for a long time while battling a monster catfish. My favorite part is having a full-grown man scream like a little girl underwater. I have become quite proficient at reading bubbles, and the look on their face after getting bit. That never gets old. I love my job!

6. And Kris, what's your favorite thing about fishing or freshwater science (or both)?

Kris: I just love being out on the water. As far as fishing goes, who doesn't like thrill of catching a lunker, or great afternoon out with the family? It is that thrill and excitement that lead me to becoming a fisheries scientist. Now I get to pay it forward and do my best to improve or enhance other people's fishing experiences.

Susan: It was so great to learn more about noodling from Skipper and Kris. Noodlers use what they know about catfish spawning behavior to find and catch big fish, and what they observe about the number and size of the fish helps fisheries managers ensure that the catfish population stays healthy. There's more to noodling than the nonsense of catching a fish by getting it to bite your arm, it's a technique based on fish ecology. Science is everywhere!

Thanks so much for listening, have a great day.

[outro clip]